

## Media Interventions and New Social Imaginaries

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Recent re-articulations of the “social imaginary” (Castoriadis 1987) have emerged due to the proliferation and dispersion of new technologies in everyday life. What effect can enacting imaginative narratives for the near future have on present conditions? By reflecting upon two case studies in Serbia (2006) and Montenegro (2009), this paper considers the construction of narrative and spectacle as crafting of social imaginaries. Drawing on participatory, ethnographic and practice-based research methods, these interventions navigate economic and social change by connecting location-based situations with global media networks.

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### Social Imaginaries

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The tagline for *Zlato!(Gold!)* reads, “Gold is familiar and always out of reach. Its value cannot be translated. Its substance is lost in the process of exchange.” This statement depicts a slippage between craft and imagination, materiality and concept. A digital public space embodies this active potential, a space filled with imaginaries, filled with the *technê* of the ancient Greeks. Heidegger and others have returned to the work of Plato and the Pre-Socratics in order to re-examine this term *technê*, discovering at the heart of our notions of *making* the origins of *technê* (Heidegger 1954, Flusser 1993). The term *technê* as material fabrication is “not necessarily bound up with a material product” (Castoriadis 231) and it becomes almost synonymous with the production of knowledge, or *epistemê*. A problematic aspect of the creative process and the imaginary is also implicated in *technê*, however. As Castoriadis points out, in contrast to notions of originality or creation “from the ground up,” the term *technê* implies assembly or transformation, almost a type of recycling of pre-existing materials. My examination of the “social imaginary” emphasizes these two aspects of *technê*, narrowing the focus of the definition to the particularly immaterial materiality of media forms and the ways that media imagery itself is recycled, thereby recombining narrative imaginaries.

First a historical backdrop to the term, “social imaginary” will help frame my two case studies in Serbia and Montenegro. Dilip Gaonkar’s introduction to the “New Imaginaries” issue in the journal *Public Culture* (2002) outlines a moment of intellectual optimism at the end of 1989 out of which emerged theories of the social imaginary at the Chicago-based Center for Transcultural Studies (CTS). In 1989 new alternatives to the concept of the civil society appeared to be taking shape through the collapse of the Leninist model of governance and transformation of Soviet bloc countries. In addition, democratic movements concerned with “gender equality, public health, and ecological protection were spreading around the globe” (Gaonkar 2). Also influenced by Habermas’ publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the group at CTS contemplated how the public sphere expanded notions of the multiple realms and means by which discourses affecting public policies are produced. In combination with the increasing presence of the global media that:

would provide the forum and framework for discussing issues of global concern . . . (t)he result would be the emergence of a transnational public sphere dedicated to promoting democratic values, human rights, and ecological justice through a potential ‘dialogue of cultures.’(3)

Gaonkar later reflected on this naïve portrayal, recognising rather that the “realities of contemporary globalization . . . [are] accompanied by the rise of new and destructive nationalisms . . . and the growing social inequalities created by a predatory economic globalization” (Ibid). His list of disappointing examples includes the former Yugoslavia, fraught by civil warfare throughout the 1990’s.

Global media did not succeed in preventing acts of violence in this location, rather it became an active player in the conflict. Television teams rushed to be the first to “sell” and broadcast stories of questionable veracity; foreign public relations teams were hired to manipulate news narratives. If anything, this conflict emphasized the disconnection between local events and the voice of global media received by an international audience.

The recognition of the failure of global and new media technologies to create a transnational public sphere as envisioned by CTS required revisions to the “social imaginary.” Gaonkar’s summary from 2002 acknowledges that social imaginaries mediate collective life and shape individual identities through multiple narratives, some localised, others circulating globally. It’s clear that the industry formats, economic expectations, and focus on as wide an audience as possible restricts what gets communicated through mainstream media. For this reason, media interventions might be considered localised media, as media that operates and communicates to a smaller audience within any given locale. The two projects discussed here aim to shift the focus away from the numbers associated with the “mass” and formulate narratives that connect the circulation of global imagery with those that are embedded in the histories, myths and patterns of daily life in a particular locale. These projects construct narratives for the imaginary that embed a dialogue with global media within their framework—reversing the direction of mainstream media through appropriation and *détournement*. Thus the project in Riejka Crnojevića, Montenegro (2009) where middle school students parade handmade puppets incorporating bits of *Spongebob Squarepants* or *Finding Nemo* is titled “River Celebration,” evoking a sense of swimming upstream in the flow of media imagery [figure 6].

The social imaginary itself is a mediator, a way of forming relationships, certainly no less real than other forms in the world. Castoriadis sees the social imaginary “as the matrix of innovation and change” (Gaonkar 8), explicitly linked by later thinkers to the operation of changing narratives that are locally produced, rather than embedded within grand narratives. Spectacular events or organised dramas that create collective action help to create social imaginaries; moments “where one freely engages with others in activities that have no predetermined purpose” (Ibid). These works do not make grandiose claims, rather in their “purposelessness” the situational interventions entertain and participate in local dialogues. The change enacted is one of furthering existing discussions (in the sense that *technê* recycles) and offering imaginative options, changing the shape of conversations, re-articulating possibilities.

### **Majdanpek, Eastern Serbia, 2006 and Riejka Crnojevića, Montenegro, 2009**

I will quickly account several of the narrative imaginaries with which the works engaged. The political and economic histories of the region form the backdrop for the media intervention *Zlato!(Gold!)*, 2006. During the period of warfare, financial sanctions against Serbia and Montenegro were imposed by the United Nations (1992-1995). The U.S. reinstated sanctions in 1998 when the Kosovo War started, initiating a bombing campaign aimed primarily at Serbian sites in 1999. Sanctions were lifted again in 2001. In 2006 when I travelled to Eastern Serbia to work in the town of Majdanpek, the Serbian state was still experiencing economic decline; resentment against American military forces still fresh on many residents’ minds. State-controlled industries like the Majdanpek mine [figure 1] had nearly stopped production completely. Rumours of arsenic and other poisoning in the location were attributed to American troops, pollution left behind by Depleted Uranium NATO bombs; stories repeated despite the fact that bombs had not been dropped there. Meanwhile, storage warehouses full of open chemical drums were left stagnant and waiting, dangerously and explosively poised for disaster.

Recent violence and destruction shaped the social imaginary in the present, shared by other histories. The region has some of the longest-running traces of mining on earth (archaeological evidence dates back to 5,000 B.C.E.), and the cultural and economic identity of the location is very much intertwined with this activity. With such a long history of open pit surface mining, google satellite imagery paints Majdanpek as a giant scar on the earth, the scale of the run-off filling entire valleys with sandy silt, creating high, flat desert landscapes strangely located where lushly forested mountain tops should be. The potential health and environmental dangers posed by the mine are much less pressing for the residents than the threat of the mine’s closure. The decline of the Serbian state contributed to many years with little employment or sense of other alternatives. Some hope was promised through privatisation of the mining industry and potential international buyers, but in the meantime with the

mine running at very low capacity, a lethargic malaise spread across the town of 11,000 inhabitants, the population caught in a period of economic depression and unemployment, waiting for work in the mine to recommence.

All signs indicated that Majdanpek should urgently locate itself on the map and achieve international recognition. Besides the proposal to sell the mine to foreign investors, other alternatives seemed to pose more problems than solutions—for example, converting the mine into a nuclear waste holding facility. Responses arose in reaction to the disregard and neglect implicit in this proposal: Majdanpek may be remote, difficult to reach, far removed from any major urban centres, but it could only be considered a place destined for “waste” if it remained overlooked—if outsiders continued not to see it. The task for changing the local situation involved demonstrating that the location had value. Developing tourism and highlighting natural resources as a way of bringing outsiders into the area meant that those living in the region had to shift their focus away from a long-standing tradition of mining and towards a new economic structure. In other words, adopting a new way of seeing their own environment and acting within the location; perhaps a more independent, entrepreneurial means of generating income (rather than waiting for the state to change the situation).

One consequence of this new framing of the space involved a repositioning of the Vlach people. Always considered peripheral, living in the mountains, these groups were suddenly recast as part of the new economy selling the area's natural resources, the traditional rituals and lifestyles potentially sold and packaged to ethno-tourists. Hand-knit socks shaped perfectly to fit the contours of the tourist's foot, home-brewed brandy and laboriously cooked traditional meals could delight those looking to escape industrial life. A Vlach shepherd finds himself prototyping tourist tchotchkes, transforming a bit of bone into a frowning dinosaur, wondering if there might be a market? [figure 2]

In this space without cinema theatres nor academies for acquiring media skills, I enlisted participants for video production. Alongside four other international artists brought to the location, we infused a bit of excitement into a habitual pattern of waiting. However, the co-production of a short work and construction of an impromptu screening venue in the local marketplace had no more than a short-lived impact. As far as I know, the eager local participants pursuing video training never continued independent production after my departure. A culture of state-controlled media takes longer to change. If our hybrid production expressed new alternative economies in a fanciful manner, the enjoyment and humour the media work created, a way of laughing at a set of changing circumstances and bringing together of cultures, did not manifest in any identifiable economic shifts. Rather, since 2006, the number of Majdanpek residents has dropped in order to pursue jobs in other locations. The economic culture of centuries persists—for now, increased international demand for copper and repairs to the mine have meant a return to the mining industry.

Not directly linked, google maps places the nearly abandoned town of Riejka Crnojevića, Montenegro [figure 5], some 557 km or nearly ten hours away from Majdanpek. The process of independent nationhood and separation from Serbia in 2006 increased international attention and investment, including the establishment of new broadcast media networks (instead of those owned by the Serbian state). Montenegro faced the task of forming an identity on the international stage. Some ancient stories have always remained culturally Montenegrin, however the official ending of the Yugoslavian state has also meant a gradual recalibration of alliances in the residents' minds. Should Montenegro primarily look to the West and see itself as part of the European Union, as a close ally of Russia, or perhaps try to remember the strengths of a united Yugoslavia? In response to these questions, the older histories embedded in the location seem to take on more significance. Riejka Crnojevića, a capital city in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the former economic hub of the fish trade in Montenegro's royal past, had been cut off by a highway constructed to access Tito's newly located centre, Titograd (1946-1992). Now sleepy and nearly empty, Riejka Crnojevića sits like an overlooked museum display, well-loved but abandoned.

In both projects, co-production methods combined historicized and localized narratives with those distinctly ‘foreign.’ In the mining town of Majdanpek, I contributed faux advertising commercials to the video narrative, fictionalised versions where golden crisps grow on trees, the environment packaged and marketed to an international audience [figs. 3 & 4]. In Riejka Crnojevića, the media presence became an excuse for a celebration, a production-oriented goal to motivate the long journey down

narrow roads to the remote location. A collection of costumed participants, puppets in hand, invaded the quiet town with a random parade. Through six weeks of workshops these characters had developed from watching *Finding Nemo*. Fish smoking cigarettes and happy starfish mingled together by the non-operational fish factory, hanging out, having conversations about the cleanliness and fruitfulness of the nearby river waters [figure 6].

The play of social imaginaries here are both a response to a situation and a new articulation; perhaps best thought of as a visual and media conversation formulated at a particular moment. They emphasize the difficulty of measuring changes that result from gestures like situational media or the unquantifiable results of shared creative spectacles. Ethnographic tasks like asking questions, observing and listening, helped to combine bits of narratives together. The production process itself acted as a constructed situation intervening into each locale. However fleeting, media technologies allowed for the articulation of social imaginaries and their recombination into forms referencing mainstream media. These new formulations reposition individuals in relation to activities and environments in their daily lives and the fact that I carried video technologies to these locations temporarily created connections with English-speaking forms of networked imagery.

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## Images



Figure 1 ArtLink catalogue, Majdanpek mine, Serbia

Source: Treister, Noa. *Art interventions: between town and villages*. Beograd: ArtLink (2007)



Figure 2 Prototype tourist item proposed by Vlach shepherd, village of Leskovo, population 431.

Source: Devereaux, E. (2013)





Figure 3 Video still, *Zlato!(Gold!)*, Majdanpek, Serbia 2006  
Source: Devereaux, E. (2006)



Figure 4 Video still, *Zlato!(Gold!)*, Majdanpek, Serbia 2006  
Source: Devereaux, E. (2006)





*Figure 5 Rijeka Crnojevica, Montenegro*  
*Source: Devereaux, E. (2009)*



*Figure 6 Puppets and costumes, Riejka(River Celebration), 2009*  
*Source: Devereaux, E. (2009)*